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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: OPPOSITION WINS SENATE BY-ELECTION RUN-OFF

REF: A) MONROVIA 570 B) MONROVIA 691 C) MONROVIA 776  
D) MONROVIA 821 E) MONROVIA 833 F) MONROVIA 841

1. (U) SUMMARY. The opposition Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) convincingly won the Montserrado County senatorial by-election in a second crucial test for the National Elections Commission (NEC). The ruling Unity Party (UP) lost the election despite heavy financial backing and support from four candidates who failed to make the second round. Embassy observer teams found the run-off better organized than the first round, but technical and procedural problems remained. The Embassy issued a press release praising the NEC and workers on a successful election, and congratulating Senator-elect Geraldine Doe-Sheriff. The conduct of this election is likely a precursor to the 2011 presidential elections. We expect both the UP and CDC, Liberia's two strongest parties, to use the intervening period to draw in support from smaller political parties and other important constituencies, such as the youth vote. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) Geraldine Doe-Sheriff of the CDC won Montserrado County's November 24 Senate by-election run-off. The final tally released by NEC Chairman James Fromayan at a November 26 press conference showed Doe-Sheriff winning 56 percent of votes cast (or 58,384 votes), while Clemenceau Urey of the ruling UP won 44 percent (45,864 votes). Doe-Sheriff's by-election win follows her November 10 first-round election victory (Ref E) in which she failed to gain the required plurality for outright victory. The NEC also reported 105,800 ballots cast (22 percent voter turnout) in the November 24 run-off. Voter participation was again low, but slightly higher than in the first round (20 percent turnout).

POLITICAL STARS, FIRST-ROUND LOSERS RALLY AHEAD  
OF RUN-OFF  
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3. (U) Most political forces divided over which candidate to back in the run-off. Only the Liberty Party (LP) and its first-round candidate Darius Dillon offered complete backing to the CDC's Doe-Sheriff. Four candidates who failed to make the run-off endorsed the UP's Urey, including Alhaji Kromah of the All Liberia Coalition Party and three independent candidates. Wilson Tarpeh, first round candidate of the Alliance for Peace and Democracy, did not support Urey despite his party leadership backing the UP candidate. Former President Taylor's National Patriotic Party (NPP) also split, though his wife, Bong County Senator Jewel Howard-Taylor, rallied to Doe-Sheriff. Early reports that the Women's Legislative Caucus backed the female CDC candidate were later countered by UP female legislators' public pro-Urey declarations.

4. (SBU) Both candidates held rallies that drew large crowds thanks to the presence of President Sirleaf and former CDC presidential candidate, soccer star George Weah. Sirleaf appeared with Urey at rallies in the core areas of UP support, Monrovia's suburbs. Doe-Sheriff and Weah focused their efforts on appearances in the CDC's strongholds of central Monrovia and on Bushrod Island, home to many of the region's poorer residents who are particularly disenchanted with the slow pace of improved living standards under the Sirleaf government.

## VOTER TURNOUT AGAIN LOW

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¶5. (U) Locally based International Foundation for Election Systems staff told emboff that turnout is typically low in Sub-Saharan African by-elections, but several poll workers encountered by Embassy observers blamed low turnout on voter apathy and increasing disenchantment with the slow pace of economic recovery since the end of the civil war. In radio interviews, registered voters attributed their lack of interest to elected legislators' failure to make good on promises made by politicians during the 2005 campaign. Indeed, Liberians increasingly view representatives elected since 2005 as unresponsive to constituent needs, preferring life in Monrovia or visits to U.S.-based constituents over maintaining regular personal contacts with country-based constituents. While a minority of legislators is actively involved in home constituencies, many Liberians believe that their legislators' actions have failed to directly impact voters' daily lives.

## RUN-OFF BETTER ORGANIZED, BUT NEC STILL LACKING CAPACITY

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¶6. (U) The NEC initiated an invigorated voter education campaign along with an added day of training for poll workers before the run-off. Observers again witnessed minor procedural and technical problems at many polling locations, but unlike in the first round, election materials were on hand for on-time opening of polling places. Poll workers showed a better understanding of voting procedures and a more customer-friendly attitude toward voters. Officers of the Liberian National Police ensured that voting passed without violence. Many poll workers and police reported to

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observers that they had spent the previous night at the polling site to protect the voting materials delivered the evening before.

¶7. (U) The Embassy issued a press release on December 1 praising Montserrado voters, the NEC, poll workers and police on a successful election, and congratulating Senator-elect Geraldine Does-Sheriff. While noting that "some procedural problems remained," the statement said Embassy observers witnessed "a free and fair electoral process that was absent of fraud."

## ELECTION DEFEAT A WAKE-UP CALL FOR RULING PARTY

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¶8. (SBU) The defeat of the president's UP in heavily populated and ethnically diverse Montserrado County indicates her party's political weakness, despite the availability of state resources, heavy financing, a recent merger with two prominent political parties, and Sirleaf's enduring star power. The UP reportedly spent more money during the campaign than the CDC, yet still failed to win. Privately many party stalwarts found Urey unimpressive and lacking political charisma. Soon after the election, UP Chairman Charles Clarke publicly chastised party representatives in government for giving jobs to diasporans and not taking care of the party faithful.

¶9. (SBU) CDC officials trumpeted the defeat of the ruling party as "a referendum on the [UP] by the Liberian people" even though the by-election was only held in Montserrado County. George Weah hinted during a radio interview on election day that he would win the presidency in 2011. There were follow-up reports of CDC youth being incited against the NEC and campaign remarks underscoring the sensitive "Country/Congo" divide in pre-election rhetoric (Ref F). The Ambassador met with Weah on November 23 and urged him to call for peaceful conduct at the polls. She also stressed the need for all parties to put aside divisive rhetoric.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: Liberian electoral law has not required registration of new voters since the 2005 election, leaving those who reached voting age in the interim and those who have recently returned disenfranchised. Urey's failure to connect with poorer urban voters and George Weah's effective mobilization of youth forces is a wake-up call for the president's party on the importance

of expanding its base beyond political and economic elites. The start of ongoing registration of voters by the NEC, which will enable greater youth participation in by-elections occurring before the 2011 general election, is the necessary first step.

THOMAS-GREENFIELD